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# Book Review: Islam, Women and Violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan

Jaskiran Mathur

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**Islam, Women and Violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan. Nyla Ali Khan. 2009. Tulika Books: New Delhi. 185 pgs Rs. 395. Paperback.**

Reviewed by Jaskiran Mathur<sup>1</sup>

Let me say at the very outset that this is a much-needed perspective on a region that has come to exemplify conflict *per se*, thus crowding out all time-honored allusions to *bahisht*<sup>2</sup> reverberating in the Mughal Emperor Jehangir's eulogy, "if there is paradise anywhere on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here." For more than six decades now Kashmir has been one of the most conflict-ridden regions in South Asia

Nyla Ali Khan is the grand-daughter of Sheikh Abdullah, the first Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. It is thus no surprise that the author offers us a uniquely *etic*, as also *emic* perception, her social location provides both the rationale and the commitment, and she does an excellent job of walking the tight rope. She states the context and her intent in the preface itself. "I belong to Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J & K), a highly volatile South Asian region with rich reservoirs of cultural, social and human wealth... Despite my emotional investment in the issue, I have tried to veer away from the seductive trap of either romanticizing or demonizing certain political actors and initiatives". [ix-x] She is not wary of treading controversial terrain and she claims the Kashmiri 'national identity' is a composite collective one, emerging from the silence of a people "...Caught between the rival siblings India and Pakistan..." [ix]

While the "...charm, splendor and heterogeneity of the Valley have enticed many a writer, historian, anthropologist, sociologist, benevolent ruler and malevolent politician..." [ix-x] Nyla Khan examines anew, a subject close to her heart and weighing heavily on her mind and soul. She uses a cross disciplinary approach with the disclaimer that her work is in no way an exhaustive treatise on the intricate political implications of the Kashmir situation. She is "...further motivated to complete this project because of the plethora of mauled versions of history cunningly making their way into mainstream Indian, Pakistani and international political discourses." [ix]

The immense respect Nyla Ali Khan has for the people of Kashmir and their perseverance against all odds "to live and define their own reality" [x] is evident, as is her almost innate conviction that without including the voices of women the narrative remains incomplete. In "the attempted relegation of Kashmiri women to the archives of memory" she sees history being subverted and her retelling of the situation employs "oral historiography" [ix] to bring women's perspectives and stories center stage. This marginalized region appears to mirror the social reality of the numerous women who have been victimized twice over in the patriarchal milieu of dominance wherein Kashmir seeks its territorial and cultural identity.

The book is divided into five chapters with an introduction and conclusion as well as a comprehensive glossary of terms, appendices containing documents establishing historical context, and eleven interesting illustrations interspersed in its 185 pages. The *Preface & Acknowledgements* by the author and an *Afterword* by the political psychologist and sociologist of science Ashis Nandy, are equally integral to the

<sup>1</sup> Jaskiran K. Mathur Ph.D. Chair Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice St. Francis College 180 Remsen Street Brooklyn NY 11201 Ph: 718 489 5476 E-mail: jmathur@stfranciscollege.edu

<sup>2</sup> An Urdu term for heaven.

discussion. The author's command over the language and its most apposite even imaginative usage makes the book quite unputdownable and leaves the reader moved, better informed and seeking answers pertaining to a historic-politico-cultural conundrum often easily and rather simplistically perceived as a religious divide. There appear to be no immediate solutions unless a significant shift takes place in the stance of the powers that be. It is reassuring that the author of this sensitive yet analytical narrative sees this as just the first in a series of books challenging the dominant, and not necessarily accurate, discourses on J & K.

The first chapter titled '*Conflicting Political Discourses Partition, Plebiscite, Autonomy, Integration*', delves into the past unflinchingly to provide us with a fairly objective history of the region leading up to the present imbroglio. Employing considerable restraint the author pursues an unbiased course presenting and evaluating the varied perspectives pertaining to the Kashmir conflict. She then examines 'Kashmiriyat', and the efforts by Sheikh Abdullah to form a national consciousness, through constructing a syncretic cultural ethos that would resonate with the diverse communities calling the region home, such an ethos would have to reach back far back enough into a common cultural past yet it would also have to be palpable in its secular and democratic application. "This significant concept does not attempt to simplify the ambiguity and complexity of religion, social and cultural identities. It neither attempts to assert a fixed identity nor reinforce the idea of purity of culture...On the contrary... brings about a metamorphosis in the determinate concept of the Indian state, and creates a situation in which the nation states of India and Pakistan are forced to confront an alternative epistemology.... it certainly was not a flawless notion..." [37-38].

In the second chapter, '*Cultural Syncretism*', the author in the spirit of 'Kashmiriyat' reaches back into the cultural past of Kashmir to focus on *Lalla-Ded*, a female *sufi* mystic from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Nyla Khan begins the chapter with the statement, "Kashmiris have taken pride in inhabiting a cultural space between Vedic Hinduism and Sufi Islam". [40] *Lalla-Ded* is an inevitable choice, who better than her to challenge the patriarchal and hierarchical order of society. There could not be a more effective way to mainstream gender and reiterate the importance of the Kashmiri woman's role in social and cultural life. "*Lalla-Ded* disavowed the psychosocial narratives inscribed on the female body in defiance of the continued conscription..." [41] The author analyses the recorded poems and paradigmatic sayings of *Lalla-Ded*, and brings forth hitherto unpublished views and commentaries from litterateurs and scholars of mysticism validating the impact of *Lalla-Ded* on the Kashmiri Muslim and Kashmiri Pandit communities. Nyla Khan also updates us on the revival of indigenous cultural institutions in contemporary J & K- the "regeneration of interest in folk literatures, mythologies, poetry etc.", [53] coincided with the casting off of the British yoke in 1947.

In chapter three, '*Political Debacle*', the author examines the repercussions of India's anti-democratic strategies in the State, which instigated oppositional and dissident responses. The promised plebiscite and the implications of economic policies to end the subservience and exploitation of peasants and craftsmen consolidated Sheikh Abdullah's position, despite the apprehensions of the Ladhakhi clergy and not without resistance from the monarchy. He sought to maintain Kashmir's autonomous status seeing the accession of J&K to India as a strategic and pragmatic necessity that he justified by "deploying the rhetoric of socialism and secularism. He continued to harbor hopes for the

creation of a sovereign Kashmir.” [58]. She includes the views of Dr. Karan Singh the scion of the erstwhile monarchy and a significant presence in Indian polity; the connotation of the 1952 Delhi Accord; the devolution heralding the rupture within the National Conference; the rise of Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad; the events leading to the incarceration of Sheikh Abdullah; and the political *volte face* that all for all practical purposes was a reneging on the promise of plebiscite. The author also examines the ‘Legitimization of this Undemocratic Process’ [66] and the “Legitimacy of Article 370” [71], as she does the role of Russia and the UN. Conscious of the various factions (Muslim, Pandit, Sikh and Dogra) in the region whose religious and political affiliations she acknowledges in her analysis of what the “Delhi Accord of 1972” [77] did or did not achieve – the underlying disillusionment and disappointment with the “Erosion of India’s Democratic Façade, 1967” [73] looms large in the text as does the irony that “The furtherance of the Hindu nationalist agenda in the state was enabled by the complicity of one of the architects of democracy and secularism, Jawaharlal Nehru” [72] and it was on his watch that the Indian government quelled the massive opposition to integrative and centralist measures with bloody maneuvers, Pakistan expecting the support of the Muslim populace actively fanned the flames of discontent resulting in the disastrous Indo-Pak war of 1965. In a note at the end of this chapter Nyla Ali Khan lists the slate of authors whose works have influenced her “conceptualization of the complexity of the Kashmir issue.” [80]

Chapter four, *‘Militarization of Jammu and Kashmir,’* begins with the victory of the National Conference led by Farooq Abdullah (Sheikh Abdullah’s son) in the 1983 Assembly elections. The author examines the Indian political scenario with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi “making overt and covert appeals to Hindu majoritarianism against grossly exaggerated secessionist threats from Muslim and Sikh minorities” [81] and goes on to delineate the fundamental structural inequities in the J & K polity, exacerbated by the political and military intrusions of the Pakistani administration. “Faulty Electoral Processes” [85] and the undermining of elected representative governments in the state was a blow to the morale of the Kashmiri people- the ensuing protests brought in the repression by paramilitary forces and the installation of Gubernatorial Politics with its potential for despotism and brutality to achieve the psychological degradation thus capitulation of a people that boomeranged via militant nationalism and a populace taking up arms to fight the oppression of the Indian state. Neither the compromises made by the NC with the Congress party, nor the formations of the Muslim United Front (MUF) highlighting the sharp divide in the valley were able to stem the disillusionment and sense of disenfranchisement, thus the armed insurgency gathered momentum after the 1987 election. The guerrilla war espousing separatism has since 1990 been countered by the repressive military action of the Indian Union, leading to a vicious cycle of violence intensifying the “distrust, neurosis and paranoia permeating the relationship between a large number of people of J& K and the India Union...” [87] In the 1990s the homegrown Hizbul Mujahdeen and the Pakistani sponsored and abetted Laskar-i-Toiba and Harkat-ul Mujahidin wreaked havoc, kidnapping western tourists for extortion, harassing Kashmiri Pandits, taking punitive action against secular Muslims and subversive action against Indian forces while also assassinating each other’s cadres. The author undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the “Militant Resistance to the Indian Administration” [90], “Communal Turn of the Insurgency” [94] and the “Terrors of

Counter Insurgency” [96] and she quite categorically holds India and Pakistan accountable for both, thwarting the cause of the independence and autonomy of J&K, as well as, the complete abdication of any adherence to ‘human rights’. As she recounts some instance from the turn of the century, she sounds hopeful enough to conclude that, “Despite the sectarian and ethnic violence in J&K, the cultural syncretism of the state has managed to garner the strength of conviction to survive.” [99]

Chapter five, *'Negotiating the Boundaries of Gender, Community, and Nationhood'*, investigates the effects of nationalist, militant, and religious discourses and praxes on a gender-based hierarchy. “The anarchy that pervades the ... has been stoked by government sponsored militants and foreign mercenaries..... has rendered women psychologically incarcerated....brutalization of the culture has been rendered more lethal by the socialization of Kashmiri boys and men into a military culture...the rigidly entrenched hierarchical relationships between men and women is inextricably linked with sexualized violence.” [101] The radical political and socioeconomic changes in the role of Kashmiri women between 1947 and 1989 are discussed; anecdotal evidence is brought in through the reminiscences of members of the women's militia, which was formed at the height of the struggle against political and military tyranny. The intrepid participation of hapless often unlettered women in the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) represents the plight of the ordinary resource-less Kashmiri as also the “Mobilization of Women.” [103] On the other hand there have arisen reactionary outfits like the Dukhtaran-e-Milat attempting “...to reconstruct historical and cultural discourse...that fundamentalist politics requires.”[104] Thus enforcing draconian non-indigenous arabization instead of concentrating on the increase in female representation in positions of authority to legitimize a defiance of normative structure and generate empowerment. “Negotiating Political, Cultural and Social Spaces” [106] has the author look at the lives of the rural native, as well as urban educated women challenging the structural determinants of their oppression courageously. They negotiate and contend with patriarchy at the micro and macro levels in innovative and intuitive ways. There is the question of the “...self styled custodians of the Islamic faith who had caricaturized Islam by reducing it to the veil.”[107] “Brutalization of Women in the Conflict Zone” [108] is illustrated through horrific tales of rampant violation a bathetic travesty which has yet to succeed in extinguishing completely the hope of regaining the traditional freedoms and prerogatives of Kashmiri women in the land of a spiritual luminary like *Lalla-Ded*. The author does earlier note that the reverence tradition bestows upon *Lalla-Ded* for her stoic demeanor in the face of her domestic situation is no less than the veneration she receives for her spiritual contribution.[49] The probability of a substantive indigenous or modern feminist movement in Kashmir is examined in Spivakian<sup>3</sup> terms[124], illuminated through the contrariness of “Reminiscences about Women’s Agential Roles or Lack thereof, 1947 and 1989” [116], and the “Conceptualization and Crystallization of Women’s Agency”[113]. She scrutinizes the enormous political and social contributions of Begum Akbar Jehan’s (Sheikh Abdulla’s wife and the author’s grandmother) amongst others; the anthropomorphic reification of the motherland in nationalist rhetoric that exemplifies “Women as Repositories of Communal Values and Cultural Tradition” [112]. Further the “Construction of Kashmiri Womanhood by Ethno-

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<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s delineation of the contexts in which the politics of representation renders the figure of the ‘third-world woman’ mute...caught as she is between tradition and modernization.

nationalists” sees the inviolability of tradition as resting on the shoulders of women who must safeguard the inner/outer dichotomy even by forfeiting their right to inherit, own or buy immovable property in the state should she “get tainted by stepping outside the cultural threshold” [110] by marrying outside her ethnicity! The author acknowledges complex power equations and the importance of variables such as class caste, ethnicity, economic status, age, and family position etc. in women’s empowerment. [117]

The usage of oral evidence that appears to be singularly authentic allows the author to approach events, notions, and literatures about which there was inadequate evidence from other sources. Opinions and experiences that may not conventionally be employed have been included as is the verbatim replication of e-mail responses and conversations; the author is thus successful in providing personal reminiscences about landmark events without mediating between oral evidence/historiography and more elitist versions of history. She aims to keep Kashmir vibrant, alive and worthy of the allegiance, attention and engagement of future generations. In conclusion however the author’s despondence seeps through as she knows the results of the 2008 elections and inevitability of the coalitions that must be created- thus the centrality of New Delhi and the quagmire of sub continental politics still continue to define the destiny of Kashmir.

This book must certainly be read by anyone who studies the juxtaposition of gender and Islam, also those who have an interest in the region, and perhaps by those who ponder over the epistemology of sovereignty, geopolitics, nation states or even non-state nationalities.